



# Testimonies of precognition and encounters with psychiatry in letters to J. B. Priestley



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## ABSTRACT

Using letters sent to British playwright J. B. Priestley in 1963, this paper explores the intersection between patient-focused history of psychiatry and the history of parapsychology in everyday life. Priestley's study of precognition lay outside the main currents of parapsychology, and his status as a storyteller encouraged confidences about anomalous temporal experience and mental illness. Drawing on virtue epistemology, I explore the regulation of subjectivity operated by Priestley in establishing the credibility of his correspondents in relation to their gender and mental health, and investigate the possibility of testimonial justice for these witnesses. Priestley's ambivalent approach to madness in relation to visions of the future is related to the longer history of prophecy and madness. Letters from the television audience reveal a variety of attitudes towards the compatibility of precognition with modern theories of the mind, show the flexibility of precognition in relation to mental distress, and record a range of responses from medical and therapeutic practitioners. Testimonial justice for those whose experience of precognition intersects with psychiatric care entails a full acknowledgement of the tensions and complicities between these two domains as they are experienced by the witness, and an explicit statement of the hearer's orientation to those domains.

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## 1. Context

Histories of psychiatry from the perspective of patients are well established, such that when Roy Porter regretted that “the history of healing is par excellence the history of doctors” (1985: p. 175) he conceded that “the mad ... are among the few groups of sufferers to have attracted much interest, and that largely because of the polemics of today's anti-psychiatry movement” (p. 183). In three decades since Porter's call for a redress of scholarly ignorance about “how ordinary people in the past have actually regarded health and sickness, and managed their encounters with medical men” (p. 176), further patient-focused histories of psychiatry have been produced, inspired not only by anti-psychiatry and patient advocacy movements but also by the emergence of “history of the emotions” and “medical humanities” as interdisciplinary fields that

are broadening the resource base and the methodologies available for social histories of illness and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> Within these studies paranormal experience has not been prominent, though the occult is sometimes discussed.<sup>2</sup> The views of psychiatric patients and mental health service users with experience of the paranormal are almost completely absent from histories of Western modernity, where the discounting of testimony from witnesses with psychiatric histories is compounded by the discounting of paranormal phenomena by mainstream science.

Studies of the close relations between mind science and the paranormal tend to be organised around researchers, theorists and

<sup>1</sup> Patient-focused histories of psychiatry since 1985 include Porter (1987), Crouthamel (2002), Hubert (2002), Suzuki (2006). See also Small (1996), p. 37 for pre-1985 uses of literature in the social history of madness.

<sup>2</sup> For example, MacDonald (1981, pp. 198–217) discusses supernatural forces in relation to the experiences of mentally disturbed patients in seventeenth-century England.

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investigating organisations.<sup>3</sup> The establishment of scientific credentials for psychical research involved its practitioners in the amplification of existing class barriers (Hazelgrove, 2000: p. 197). A history of parapsychology “from below”, recording paranormal phenomena in the context of everyday life, awaits development. This paper focuses on a neglected resource consisting of letters written to the British playwright and broadcaster J. B. Priestley (1894–1984) in response to a television appeal for experiences of non-linear time.

For reasons discussed below, television viewers felt a special bond of trust with Priestley, and were prepared to make extensive personal revelations. There was no formal consent procedure, and even those correspondents who are no longer data subjects (assuming a life span of 100 years) are likely to have living relatives who may recognise their story. In what follows, those who explicitly requested anonymity have been included in quantitative analysis only. In all other cases, identifying details are restricted to the minimum required for using the selected part of their story. As a compromise between open research and immediate identification, I have given the archive folder number but not the full manuscript identifier for each letter quoted here.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Letters to J. B. Priestley

On March 17, 1963 the British playwright and broadcaster J. B. Priestley discussed his forthcoming non-fiction book *Man and Time* (1964a) on the BBC Sunday night arts programme *Monitor*. Viewers were invited to write in with their own experiences of precognition and other temporal anomalies. The programme was subsequently broadcast in New Zealand, and notices about Priestley's project appeared in the *Sunday Telegraph* (Purser, 1963), *Sunday Times* (Wiggin, 1963), *Radio Times* (4 April 1962, p. 34) (Anonymous, 1963), and *Punch* (4 December 1963). The response was unexpectedly profuse, and Priestley devoted two chapters to the correspondence in his book *Man and Time* (1964), including twenty-four examples of precognitive dreams. An excerpt from *Man and Time* in the *Observer* (25 October 1964) (Priestley, 1964b) yielded further responses from the public. Just under 1500 letters survive, held among Priestley's papers in Special Collections at the University of Bradford, UK and in the archives of the Society for Psychical Research at Cambridge University Library, UK.

The timing of Priestley's project, five months after the Cuban missile crisis, was significant: the future of humanity was a very real, collective concern for Western media audiences. The period 1945 to the early 1960s was “permeated by a sense of spiritual or religious crisis engendered by the Holocaust and prospect of nuclear Armageddon, reinforced by economic austerity at home, loss of Empire, and continued military involvements abroad” (Richards, 2009: p. 186), with “new psychological categories” coming to replace “old-fashioned religious, moral, and material principles” (Porter, 1996: p. 388). Priestley featured on a roster of British public intellectuals, academics and religious thinkers with ready access to

the media, who were “inclined toward rather more open-minded and collaborative relations with one another than they had been until 1939” (Richards, 2009: p. 186) and he helped to articulate the “new and baffling complexity” of English life for his readers (Porter, 1996: p. 393). An optimistic, adventurous orientation to crisis and renewal is shared by Priestley and members of his audience, exemplified by a correspondent who states “I do so agree with your feeling that things are moving rather quickly ... The *Observer* today gives its front page to the Bishop of Woolwich's article – it is exactly what my dear husband had been hoping for, expecting, + waiting for – a ‘break through’ – I think we are in most exciting, if dangerous, times. But Christianity was always meant to be dangerous – I have not yet dreamed of a Bomb!” (SPR MS 47/2)

Born in Bradford in the North of England to a schoolmaster and a mill worker, Priestley served in the First World War as an infantryman and officer, before studying English and History at Cambridge University with some support from an ex-officer's grant. His main source of income during the 1920s was journalism for London periodicals, but he also began publishing fiction before launching a career as a playwright in the 1930s. Priestley's rise to literary prominence coincided with the latter years of overtly experimental writing by modernist authors such as T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, and with the arrival of new modes of textual clarity and explicit left politics associated with George Orwell and W. H. Auden. His output remains absent from university curricula while these two broad groupings endure, yet Priestley achieved a distinctive blend of experimental realism, chiefly through the manipulation of time in plays that confront the audience with questions about morality and privilege in relation to bourgeois life choices.<sup>5</sup> These plays reached a wider audience through television adaptation, and many viewers remembered their author fondly for his morale-raising radio broadcasts during the Second World War. Priestley was instrumental in promoting the work of C. G. Jung in Britain, largely through radio broadcasts in the 1940s and 50s (Schoenl, 1998). Describing himself as a “broadbrow” (Baxendale, 2007: p. 18), Priestley was noted for his commitment to a classless realm of British knowledge and culture in which intellect was directly engaged with lived experience. As one respondent to the *Monitor* appeal noted, “I can think of no other writer who evokes so strongly the urge to talk back” (Priestley MS 17/5). For many viewers, the request for personal experiences of temporal anomaly offered a pretext to write fan mail.

Priestley's standing among the British public influenced the volume of correspondence received in response to the *Monitor* programme, the nature of what viewers were prepared to disclose, and the terms on which they narrated their experience in relation to established authorities. Correspondents were prepared to relate intimate and problematic experience to a renowned storyteller whose plays and novels were interwoven with their own life stories. “I've always had a special feeling for your work ... as if you were one of the family, like Gracie Fields or the Halle orchestra, bless you all”, wrote one audience member, capturing a sentiment widely shared across the correspondence. (Priestley MS 17/8) Many enclosed examples of poetry, fiction, scripts, autobiography and philosophical and mathematical work for his consideration. Priestley's lack of scientific or academic standing conferred freedom on those who perceived the limits of existing modes of knowledge and wished to speculate about future prospects. Discussion during the *Monitor* broadcast of Priestley's own precognitive dreams (Priestley, 1964a: pp. 197–198) assured viewers that similar reports would be taken seriously. In sum, Priestley was a

<sup>3</sup> The notable exception is mediumship which has been explored from the perspective of female and working class practitioners by Owen (1989) and Oppenheim (1985). Besides contributions to the present volume, the relations between psychology, psychiatry and paranormal phenomena are explored in Ellenberger (2008, first published 1970), Williams (1985), Crabtree (1993), Shamdasani (1993), Shamdasani (1994), Shamdasani (2003, first published 1996), Luckhurst (2002), Wolfram (2009), Lachapelle (2011), Le Maléfian, Evrard, and Alvarado (2013), Sommer (2013) and a special issue of *History of the Human Sciences* (2012) on Relations between Psychical Research and Academic Psychology in Europe, the USA and Japan.

<sup>4</sup> Items in the Priestley papers at the University of Bradford are in any case unnumbered within the folders.

<sup>5</sup> On Priestley's time plays and his engagement with the work of J.W. Dunne and P.D. Ouspensky see Fischer (2013).

confidant and companion to viewers from a broad social spectrum who sought reception for matters that could not easily be accommodated in formal educational, religious or social contexts.

### 3. Precognition research in the mid-twentieth century

Priestley's approach to precognition diverged from the main currents of parapsychology research during the twentieth century. *Man and Time* opens with a confession of "prejudice, bias, an approach to some extent directed by feeling", introducing "a personal essay" by "a Time-haunted man addressing himself chiefly to all those people he knows from experience to be also Time-haunted" (p. 12). Priestley offers "no careful analysis, no exact figures" with respect to the letters, adding that "If without such treatment they cannot be accepted as evidence, then we shall have to do without evidence." (p. 192) Knowledge of future events had become a topic of widespread popular and professional interest with the publication of *An Experiment with Time* (1927) by aeronautical engineer J. W. Dunne (1875–1949), whose book was revised for subsequent editions in 1929 and 1934 and was frequently reprinted thereafter.<sup>6</sup> Dunne's theory of serial time, which he developed to account for the phenomenon of dreaming future events, received serious discussion in scientific and philosophical journals, but few reviewers countenanced the infinite regress on which his theory was based.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, readers from all walks of life maintained dream journals according to Dunne's simple instructions, and even those who had not read *An Experiment with Time* were exposed to the general idea through its adaptation in diverse literary and screen forms. Priestley's play *Time and the Conways* (1937) is one of numerous fictional portrayals of Dunne's claim that anyone may visit the future while sleeping, and that we awake with memories of events to come.<sup>8</sup> In *Man and Time* Priestley acknowledges the extent of Dunne's influence, surmising that "Without his examples, and his advice on the immediate recording of dreams, I suspect that at least a third of the best precognitive dreams I have been sent would never have come my way." (p. 244)

Over 200 of the *Monitor* letters refer to Dunne, though often in passing and along the lines of not having fully grasped the theory of serial time. Only a handful mention J. B. Rhine (1895–1980) and Louisa Rhine (1891–1983), who represented the leading edge of scientific research into extra-sensory perception (of which precognition is a specific category) during the mid-twentieth century. Mauskopf and McVaugh describe J. B. Rhine as a "critical" figure in the transformation of psychical research from "a rather disorganized amateur activity, mixing spiritualism with attempts at experimentation, into a more coherently structured professional and research enterprise" (1980: pp. xii–xiii), though this verdict occludes the role of Rhine's forerunner at Duke University, William McDougall, (Lamont, 2013: p. 201) and exaggerates the amateurism of leading figures in the Society for Psychical Research, discussed below.<sup>9</sup> One of the cases cited in Louisa Rhine's "Precognition and Intervention" (1955) was

especially interesting to Priestley, and he discussed it at length alongside the cases he had collected in *Man and Time* (pp. 225, 227, 258–259), but there appears to have been no contact between Priestley and the Rhines until January 1966 when J. B. Rhine wrote to Priestley asking for publication details of *Man and Time* (Priestley MS 17/8/15). Turning to parapsychology research in the UK, Priestley received detailed letters from Margaret Eastman and Celia Green of the Psychophysical Research Unit at Oxford, UK during the summer of 1963, but he does not seem to have been particularly interested in their contributions relating to the psychology and physics of precognition. Given Priestley's belated and cursory engagement with scientific research in this area, and his ambivalent stance regarding "evidence", it is not surprising to find the *Monitor* collection absent from Eisenbud's listing of five collections of precognition cases dating from 1888 to 1970 (1975: p. 101) and from Irwin's survey of precognition research in the twentieth century (1999: pp. 115–122).

### 4. Credibility: gender and madness

Priestley and his secretary divided the *Monitor* correspondence into six categories, A to F.<sup>10</sup> 214 letters (14% of the total) were not categorised, while four were assigned to dual categories. F designates "long screeds from obvious madmen, detailed accounts of books I had read myself, and letters from people who thought I was in need of a sermon" (1964a: p. 192). Priestley states that he did not pay much attention to this pile which he labelled "Odds and Ends", yet it represents 24% of the total correspondence (355 letters). D stands for "Books Recommended" (35 letters, approximately 2%), while E covers "Opinions" (179 letters, 12%). Just nine letters (fewer than 1%) were designated A, representing "the influence of the future on the present" when awake (all emphases in quotations are Priestley's). B denotes "clearly stated and what seemed to me trustworthy accounts of precognitive dreams" (p. 192), with 157 examples (11%). C is the largest category with 536 examples (36%), consisting "of precognitive dreams not clearly stated and not sufficiently trustworthy, of premonitions and queer 'hunches' that came right, and of various odd little Time experiences not easy to explain but equally not easy to prove." (p. 193) Also marked C are "dreams offered as precognitive that might be explained by telepathy (which I do not deny but must keep clear of Time)" (p. 206). In practice, there was considerable fluidity between categories B through F, and many letters might sit in any of these five groups.

Having cited "trust" in differentiating B from C, Priestley reverts to "evidence" in expressing his respect for the C group: "Let me say of this battalion of correspondents, who took the trouble to write to a stranger, that I believe that all but a possible half-platoon were innocent of desiring either to deceive me or to deceive themselves. I regard their letters as evidence of a sort, but for my purpose here not quite good enough." (p. 193) Again, describing the split between dramatic life events and trivial occurrences in B cases, Priestley suggests that "trivial dreams and the tiny incidents that confirm them ... offer better evidence against our familiar concept of Time than the more dramatic and striking dreams of catastrophes and death. They are ... more likely to be true because no strong personal feelings are involved in them." (p. 221) Having made a virtue of his own subjectivity in the organization of precognition reports, Priestley seeks to control the extent to which his correspondents'

<sup>6</sup> On Dunne and his relationship with psychical researchers and parapsychologists, see Mauskopf and McVaugh (1980: p. 225) and Inglis (1984: pp. 227–231).

<sup>7</sup> Reviews of *An Experiment with Time* and its sequel *The Serial Universe* (1934) include Levy (1927), Nagel (1927), Russell (1929), Broad (1935), Russell (1935).

<sup>8</sup> See Flieger (1997) and Stewart (2008) for discussion of Dunne's theory and some of its literary uses. See also Phillips (1974), Flieger (1996), Hopper (1995), Stratton (2002), O'Connell (2009) for examples of further literary engagements with Dunne and serialism. Literary uses of Dunne extend far beyond the authors and works named in these studies.

<sup>9</sup> On the close relations between psychical research and mainstream sciences see note 3, and in addition Noakes (1999, 2004, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Letters in category F, along with those sent in after the publication of *Man and Time*, are held among the bulk of Priestley's papers at the University of Bradford. Those marked A–E are held in the archives of the Society for Psychical Research at the University Library, Cambridge.

subjectivity might weaken the case for temporal anomalies. This process of control is partly driven by the outsider status of paranormal experience, and it involves equivocal negotiations with the sex and sanity of witnesses.

Priestley affirms a long standing stereotype when he states that “many women are prejudiced (though perhaps in secret) against a rational and positivist view of life; they want the world to contain inexplicable elements of the irrational and the marvellous; they cannot resist having their fortunes told.” (p. 194) Women are more ready to claim prophecy, making their reports less credible, but they are also “in certain matters more open-minded than men, ... less likely to be put into blinkers by ideas” and so more likely to report anomalous experiences that might help challenge the linear conception of time. Priestley states that “the proportion of women to men in the B and C categories is about three to one.” It is possible that a section of the correspondence is missing from the archives, for Priestley estimates the number of C letters at between 600 and 700 at the time of writing his book, while the total marked C in the SPR archive is 536. Of these, 319 are from women, 158 from men and 59 do not disclose gender. Of the letters marked B, 78 are from women, 58 from men and 21 do not disclose. If these figures are representative of the complete correspondence, then the ratio of women to men in B and C combined is 1.84:1. It is clear that one function of the distinction between “trustworthy” B letters and “not sufficiently trustworthy” C letters is to create a gender gradient that will mitigate against the feminine affiliation with “the irrational and the marvellous”, moving from a female to male ratio of 2:1 in C, to a ratio of 1.34:1 in B. A further gender gradient is effected in the selection of trustworthy cases from B for discussion in *Man and Time*, with nine from female correspondents, fourteen from men and one of undisclosed gender, representing a near-reversal of the gender ratio compared to the total of B letters.

Priestley's ambivalent negotiation with feminine credulity is reprised in his invocation of madness. On the one hand, he relegates “long screeds from obvious madmen” to category F, and does not read them (p. 192). On the other hand, he locates himself towards the liberated end of a spectrum of tolerance: “At one extreme is a narrow intolerant bigotry, snarling at anything outside the accepted world picture, and at the other is an idiotic credulity, the prey of any glib charlatan. At one end the world becomes a prison, at the other a madhouse. ... I would rather risk the madhouse than enter the prison.” (p. 194) Affirmative comments about madness in the *Monitor* broadcast elicited responses from viewers who found Priestley's stance reassuring: “I was amused by your remark on ‘Monitor’ tonight that ‘you no longer care whether you go mad’ in contemplating these things”; “As you observed on your T.V. interview, one could almost go potty with thinking about time!”; “I would much rather be drunk or mad in company with Mr. J. B. Priestley than be sane or sober in company with all the sane and sober ‘thems’ who are so busy misgoverning the world at the moment.” (all SPR MS 47/2) Such comments, including Priestley's own remark about risking “the madhouse”, are written from a position of inferred or assumed sanity while contemplating possible transition into a state of insanity. There is the suggestion of a “sweet spot” along the continuum from sanity into madness, at which the subject is sufficiently liberated from convention for precognition to be feasible, but not so far along as jeopardise meaningful communication. There are several letters from correspondents who discuss their own contact with psychiatric authorities and who have experienced mental health conditions in relation to precognition. These letters, discussed below, reveal a more complex and multifarious relationship between mental health and prophecy than is found in the more casual references to going “potty” and being “drunk or mad”.

In establishing credibility gradients through the organisation of precognition narratives, Priestley is operating what Fricker describes as “identity power”. Such power “is an integral part of the mechanism of testimonial exchange, because of the need for hearers to use social stereotypes as heuristics in their spontaneous assessments of their interlocutor's credibility.” (2007: pp. 16–17) Fricker posits two modes of identity power: active (performed through an action, such as a man explicitly silencing a woman) and structural (where the power has no subject, for example when women do not speak because they are socially excluded). She develops the concept of a “virtuous hearer” who achieves “testimonial justice” through being “alert to the impact not only of the speaker's social identity but also the impact of their own social identity on their credibility judgement.” (pp. 91–92) I am not concerned here with identifying the extent of active or structural identity power operating in Priestley's approach to the letters, nor with evaluating his virtues as a hearer. Instead, I want to pursue Fricker's concept of “testimonial justice”, asking what a virtuous hearing of the letters would entail and exploring the implications of such a hearing for the collection and evaluation of spontaneous cases of precognition. In developing this analysis I will focus on mental health, a complex aspect of identity power not discussed by Fricker. If “mad” speakers are automatically discounted as not credible in the investigation of psychic phenomena, then any account of those phenomena will have a significant testimonial injustice at its core. On the other hand, if testimonial justice can be established for witnesses of paranormal phenomena who have experienced mental illness, it should follow that testimonial justice for all such witnesses, regardless of their mental health, has been established on a surer footing. This is important because any individual's mental health status will vary during their lifetime, may not be disclosed or evident in relation to their testimony, and will furthermore depend on what criteria are used to determine “sanity” or diagnose a psychiatric condition.

Although I am not making direct credibility judgements about the testimonies Priestley received, some dialogue between my own social identity and my stated aim of restoring erased voices to the historical record is needed. There are precedents for historians making explicit their own experience and values, for example in Jeffrey Kripal's incorporation of “spiritual autobiography” into his account of male mysticism in *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom* (2001), or Barbara Taylor's historical memoir of the British mental health system based on her own experience as a psychiatric patient, *The Last Asylum* (2014). In approaching the letters to Priestley I am conscious of my own social identity as a cis female, economically privileged, white British university lecturer with long term mild to moderate depression. I was raised and confirmed as a member of the Anglican Church, from which I moved in my early teens into an intense evangelical/charismatic period that yielded to an evasively secular outlook. To my knowledge I have not experienced precognition, but I have attended a course on dreams at the Spiritualists' National Union in the UK and am keeping a dream journal according to the instructions for detecting precognition advocated by J. W. Dunne.

## 5. Precognition and telepathy in the history of psychology

Priestley's ambivalent negotiation with madness participates in a longer history of complex negotiations with precognition and telepathy in the history of psychology. At the beginning of *Interpreting Dreams* (1899), Freud identified Aristotle as the originator of a psychological approach through his opposition to the idea of dreams as “inspiration provided by the gods”, regarding them instead as “a product of the dreaming mind” (2006: pp. 12–13). Aristotle's “On Prophesying by Dreams” (350 BCE) explained



apparently prophetic dreams as simply coincidences, or else caused by sensitivity to small bodily sensations.<sup>11</sup> Divination in sleep was unlikely to be true, since “the power of foreseeing the future and of having vivid dreams is found in persons of inferior type, which implies that God does not send their dreams” (McKeon, 1941: p. 628). If God did send true messages about the future, these would surely be received while awake and by the wise, but instead we find the phenomenon among those whose mind “is not given to thinking, but, as it were, derelict, or totally vacant, and, when once set moving, is borne passively on in the direction taken by that which moves it.” (p. 629) In Plato’s *Phaedrus* (370 BCE), Socrates includes prophecy among “the beautiful deeds of madness arising from gods” (1998: p. 48). Guven explains that “Socrates distinguishes madness of human origin (a disease) from madness as a gift from gods”, of which there are four types including “the *mantic* art” or “*mania*” of divination (2006: p. 24). In the *Apology*, Socrates foretells his own death and the fate of those who condemn him, in a move that Fagan associates with the prophet’s narrative autonomy: “He is the narrator of his own history, the expounder of his stance toward his present situation, the prophet of his own future. Socrates is, in essence, the bard who performs his own mythic tale.” (2009: p. 96) From antiquity, then, we have a tension between external, suprahuman messages and internal mental or physical phenomena, heightened by the challenge that a self-narrating prophetic subject poses to other forms of authority, be they political, judiciary, religious, philosophical or medical.

Modern psychology and psychiatry are not founded on so easy a transition from supernormal powers to ordinary operations of mind as Freud’s celebration of Aristotle would solicit. Western psychological traditions have included automatic writing, magnetism, mediumship, mesmerism, mysticism, universal soul, and uses of mind science to forward religious faith.<sup>12</sup> Concepts of the unconscious developed through traditions of German Romanticism that offered a mechanism for prophecy in terms of “somnambulant lucidity”, a nocturnal capacity for contact with events distant in time or space via a universal soul (Ellenberger, 2008: p. 78; Sommer, 2013: p. 41). Through the work of founder members of the Society for Psychical Research, an anti-materialist approach to the study of mental capacities included opportunities for the public to participate in experimental studies from the late nineteenth century onwards, but the terms of engagement were carefully controlled. “Further records of experience will be most welcome”, wrote Gurney, Myers and Podmore in the preface to *Phantasms of the Living* (1886: vi), framing the latest researches into telepathy as a collaborative project in which readers might consolidate the rebuttal of “any presumption which science had established against the possibility of spiritual communion” (li). Dreams from 5360 subjects, collected between 1874 and 1885, formed a major part of the evidence, yet “Gurney’s dilemmas over how to distinguish between significant and insignificant dreams capture the tension between the empirical and the ineffable that plagues their collective project.” (Groth & Lusty, 2013: 71) The management of testimony in these foundational researches was achieved by a separation between the narration of dreams and their underlying mechanism: “while the dream account was understood as intrinsically fallible, the process of dreaming and what it revealed about the subliminal layers of the dreamer’s psychic life was integral to the broader psychological concerns of both Gurney and Myers.” (p. 71) Telepathic and precognitive dreams were valuable in developing Myers’s extended concept of personality, but their value as

scientific evidence had to be redeemed from the self-narrating prophetic subject. This was a “conservative agenda” for psychical research, founded on “hostility ... towards popular inspiration” and resistant to “the spiritual enfranchisement that possession and inspired dreaming brought about.” (Hayward, 2004: 166)

Freud’s explanation of apparently prophetic dreams in terms of wish-fulfilment at the conclusion of *Interpreting Dreams* is similarly fraught. He “warns against” occultism, “while at the same time appropriating, swallowing, the foreign body of the phenomena” studied by occultists, “in order to turn it into the matter of psychoanalysis” (Kofman, 1994: pp. 115–116). In “Psycho-analysis and Telepathy” (1921), Freud demonstrates the operation of wish-fulfilment through analysis of two patients’ irrational belief in unfulfilled prophecies. The argument requires Freud to subscribe to telepathy: in each case, the fortune teller is unconsciously receiving strong unconscious wishes from the client. He concludes that unfulfilled prophecies “can provide the best material on the question of thought-transference” (1955: p. 190), perhaps because there is less risk of the wish-fulfilment explanation being upstaged by corroborative details in the story of a fulfilled prophecy.

Psychoanalysis is fragile in relation to its swallowing of the occult (Kofman, 1994: p. 98). As Freud explains, the entirety of science is jeopardized by the “fearful collapse of critical thought”, a “collapse in values” that must follow from the acceptance of any single occult phenomenon (1955: p. 180). His defence of precarious, hard-working analysis against the easy results of spirit knowledge invokes the popular association between prophecy or time travel and gambling: “If spiritual beings who are the intimate friends of human enquirers can supply ultimate explanations of everything, no interest can be left over for the laborious approaches to unknown mental forces made by analytic research. So, too, the methods of analytic technique will be abandoned if there is a hope of getting into direct touch with the operative spirits by means of occult procedures, just as habits of patient humdrum work are abandoned if there is a hope of growing rich at a single blow by means of a successful speculation.” (p. 180) Apparently fulfilled predictions are simply coincidence, including Freud’s closest personal brush with prophecy in the “old peasant woman” who tells his mother that “she had given the world a great man” (2006: p. 208). As a self-narrating subject, Freud paradoxically fulfils that prophecy through his dedication to the laborious, humdrum and fragile science of analysis (Kofman, 1994: 98).

By the 1960s the vulnerability of mind science in face of superstition had been reversed, and dreaming subjects felt obliged to acknowledge, confront, or otherwise accommodate Freudian theory.<sup>13</sup> Responses range from the belief that “Freud has the explanation” for “strange occurrences” (SPR MS 47/2), to the conviction that “Freudian explanation of dreams, I am afraid, cannot and does not fit any of these dreams that I have related”, or that “My dreams ... are completely outside any Freudian theory” (both SPR MS 47/3). Others suggest some form of compromise, one person reporting “I naturally looked for freudian explanation, but could not and still do not believe that I tried even subconsciously, to make the dream come true” (Priestley MS 17/5), while another affirms psychoanalytic truths in parallel with a commitment to experiences that lie beyond its scope: “I do not believe that dreams have any significance except a Freudian one ... Yet this dream insists that I remember it.” (SPR MS 47/3)

While Freud arrived at validation of the prophetic “old peasant woman” by negating the fact of prophecy, Jung declared that his work had been stimulated by a recurring dream which he

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle’s treatment of prophetic dreams is discussed at greater length in Kroker (2007), pp. 36–38.

<sup>12</sup> See note 3 and in addition Harrington (1985), Gauld (1992), White (2012).

<sup>13</sup> On popular expositions of Freudian ideas for British audiences, see Richards (2000) and Porter (1996).

interpreted as an auspice of war in Europe (Shamdasani, 2005: pp. 97–98). The intervention of an exploding bookcase in Freud and Jung's 1909 debate about precognition and parapsychology is well known, and Freud's subsequent letter rehearses the defence against a "collapse of critical thought" motif articulated a decade later: "My credulity, or at least my willingness to believe, vanished with the magic of your personal presence" (Jung, 1964: p. 333). Jung, too, set limits on personal magic, along lines that recall both the Aristotelian concern with labile minds and Freud's distinction between hard work and instant results. "Every proper prophet strives at first manfully against the unconscious imposition of this role. When therefore a prophet emerges in no time at all, one does better to think of a psychic loss of equilibrium", he wrote in 1928 (Shamdasani, 2004: p. 81). Here Jung is concerned with the "superhuman responsibility of the prophet", a theme with which Priestley and many of his correspondents are also preoccupied as they query the scope of free will and intervention in foreseen events.

Uses of Jung in the *Monitor* correspondence tend to be more open-ended and speculative than the engagement with Freud and psychoanalysis, as correspondents invoke his views on libido, synchronicity, eternity, and tribal culture. Jung inspires a questioning lyricism: "may I ask what your opinion of Time is, in relation to Jung's theory on Libido? he says the Tide goes out then the Tide comes in, it is day, it is night, you hate you love you cry you laugh." (SPR MS 47/2, no apostrophe in original) And he is invoked in the context of esoteric exploration: "We also have the odd events which Jung brings up in his theory of synchronicity. The concepts of cyclic time such as the Maya view of the fortunes of the Katuns. And of course the prophecies of Nostradamus and St. Hildegard of Singen, and Mother Shipton. You no doubt know the I-Ging." (SPR MS 47/2) Shamdasani explains that "A large measure of the public interest in Jung stems from" his having "under the guise of a modern scientific psychological theory, ... valorized the prophetic and mysterious powers of the dream, to a greater extent than any other modern psychologist". (2003: p. 101) Such an accommodation between theory and mystery is precisely what many of Priestley's correspondents are seeking, yet the diffuse, variegated nature of references to Jung in the letters suggests that Jungian theory had become less sharply authoritative in everyday life than Freudian concepts were proving to be.

## 6. Psychiatry and precognition

Correspondents who state that they experienced a nervous breakdown, and / or who have consulted a psychiatrist or psychotherapist, are found across the range of Priestley's categories A–F. Some have carried the burden of their foresight for many years, either waiting for some foreseen disaster to arise or, looking back, wondering whether they should have risked accusations of madness or witchcraft by speaking of their vision in an attempt to divert the course of events. While many report that precognition enabled them to stay calm as alarming events unfolded, or to accept a distressing event because the dream prepared them for it, for others the opposite is true: "It is always the feeling of helplessness that is the strongest – whatever it is must happen, as if it were a repetition of something which had already happened, like the returning jar of a scratch on a gramophone record." (SPR MS 47/3) Another correspondent who has waited many years for the fulfilment of a recurring dream finds the intensely distressing scenario visited on a close relative instead, and can only look on "powerless" (SPR MS 47/2). The dreamer has nervous breakdown following this crisis, and the dream ceases to recur after its fulfilment. In another case, nervous breakdown signals the beginning of many years overshadowed by a future event, against which Jungian analysis

can only make modest inroads: "I felt better, but the origin and cause of my fears could never be discovered, so my illness persisted." (SPR MS 47/9) Priestley's broadcast provides the opportunity to articulate an alternative diagnosis: "I had never thought of my illness in terms of 'Time', but at the moment it happened I knew instantly that this had been my anxiety."

Priestley's literary approach elicited narratives about time as an illness that could not be fully understood or resolved by professional healers. One person describes being "haunted ... by the idea of the 'conveyor belt to the tomb' that you mentioned," and reports persistent, "often unpleasant" dreams "connected with the fact of Time." (SPR MS 47/11) A psychiatrist was "not much help" in dealing with the problem, leaving this person with "a sort of desperate feeling that I've got to solve the riddle of Time." A comparable case involves transcendent experiences associated with "physical and mental suffering", resulting in consultation with a psychiatrist "as the doctor was worried about my health – doctors as a whole do not seem to accept such experiences as normal." (Priestley MS 17/6) In this instance, mystical writings were offered as therapeutic: "The psychiatric Specialist could find nothing wrong with me and said the mental and physical symptoms were the result of a severe shock – and my experience, to an atheist, could well come under that heading – and recommended me to read 'The Timeless Moment,' but I have not done so as I could not remember the author."<sup>14</sup> A contrasting letter offers an intensely blissful transcendent experience with distress resulting from the return to waking life and subsequent hospitalisation. This person describes "being quite open, + willing to co-operate" with the doctor, but is rebuffed by a suggestion that the experience was merely "hallucination". (Priestley MS 17/5)

Priestley represented an alternative source of help and authority beyond the capacities of formal psychiatry: "I left all the anxieties in hospital when I left in the January. I seldom talk of my experiences because people are embarrassed about mental hospitals and madness and as I was considered mad at the time I was advised to forget all about it. I was pleased that you have reached the time of discernment when you need no longer consider the opinions of others." (Priestley MS 17/7) One correspondent with suicidal feelings reports that writing a long letter "has saved me from something awful". (SPR MS 47/3) Another describes "three instances of pre-cognition that have made life frightening at times", including a suicide image that is counterbalanced with reflection on the relationship between creativity and "a desperate urge to search for something that is elusive", and concludes with the hope that Priestley himself "can sort it out". (SPR MS 47/9) Letters across the categories B–F express the need for precognition and other anomalous temporal experiences to have recognition beyond the status of psychiatric symptom. One correspondent "cannot talk to anyone as no one has the least idea what I am getting at and are all too ready to dub me mental. I cannot think this is so, + I told my doctor that I was sure there was some big major breakthrough coming that would explain why I knew what I had to do"... Will you please try to help me understand?" (SPR MS 47/13) The term "breakthrough" recurs in another letter from someone who disagrees with a friend's verdict that their precognitive experience constitutes a "breakdown". (SPR MS 47/4)

There is also evidence of a more positive and at times collaborative relationship between precognitive vision and psychiatric treatment. One person writes to Priestley from a mental hospital and describes a feeling, on arrival, of having previously dreamed

<sup>14</sup> *The Timeless Moment* (1946) by Herbert Warner Allen includes chapters on "Union with God", "A Fantasy in Time", "Miracles and Prophecy" and "The Divine Purpose".

about being there. Medicine and precognition are partners in recovery: “I put down this feeling to some kind of mental confusion caused by the drugs I was taking, and, even after listening to what you had to say tonight, I am still inclined to believe that the effect was due to the drugs. But despite my scepticism I must confess that I found the time muddle I seemed to have got into particularly reassuring.” Another describes hearing voices while in hospital recovering from a nervous breakdown. What might be taken as a symptom of mental illness becomes instead a foreshadowing of the return to domestic normality: “a few days later during the weekend at home, I suddenly found the experience repeating exactly, the voices in dialect were a radio play” (both SPR MS 47/2). There is also evidence of patients being supported in their exploration of time by doctors and therapists, whose case notes become a repository for testimonies in support of precognition. One patient offers “independent proof” of a precognitive dream, since “recording dreams is part of the therapy. My psychiatrist has all my dreams in his ‘dossier’”. (SPR MS 47/6) Another states that the psychotherapist has “pointed out the possibilities for self-delusion in private predictions”, and concedes that precognition of domestic events may not carry much weight, but goes on to describe a prediction relating to international politics that was written out in full, signed and dated, and submitted to the doctor. (Priestley MS 17/5) This comes from an experienced patient who explains that treatment for “anxiety-neurosis” based in childhood conflict has made them “hypersensitive to that type of situation, even on an international level. The doctor agrees with this.” Professional corroboration comes across even more strongly in a letter from somebody whose doctor had seen the *Monitor* broadcast and urged the patient to contact Priestley: “He mentioned that you might be interested in my experiences. I have, on rare occasions had some very detailed dreams which I think project into the fourth dimension. The Doctor has also said that I am the only person that he has heard of who can actually do this.” (SPR MS 47/10)

Such practice is corroborated by articles in professional journals during the mid-twentieth century by practitioners open to precognition.<sup>15</sup> Three such therapists among Priestley’s correspondents illustrate a range of supportive stances toward cases of precognition. One psychiatrist, with “a very high regard for Jung”, discusses the extent of scepticism and “the lengths to which some people will go to maintain their adherence to what in psychology I should imagine corresponds to the classical physics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century”. (SPR MS 47/7) Another consultant, with extensive experience of patients reporting “displacements in time”, acknowledges that some of these may be “unreliable witnesses”, or “psychically disturbed”, but adds that “this does not necessarily invalidate their experiences: on the contrary it frequently happens that some psychic disturbance is one of the factors causing these experiences, as for example the influence of drugs, alcohol, hypnosis or emotional shock and accidents.” A letter from a clinical psychologist combines elements of each of the two approaches above, looking forward to a time when psychology can be “brought into unity with physics”, not only by emulating the space-time revolution, but through confluence between the new physics and new approaches to the mind (both SPR MS 47/9). This correspondent, who is based in California, outlines experiments in the therapeutic uses of LSD, commenting “it has been amazing for me to see the extent to which paranormal faculties of the mind have developed during the process”. Such examples affirm that even after Freudian concepts such as wish-fulfilment had gained widespread acceptance among therapeutic professionals and their patients, parallel explorations into paranormal capability did not cease. Poised just

before the rise of transpersonal psychology and anti-psychiatry, Priestley’s *Monitor* appearance elicited patient and practitioner testimonies that are striking for the diversity of orientations toward the relationship between precognition and psychiatry in evidence.

## 7. Conclusions

First person narratives of precognition in relation to psychiatric treatment reveal two intersecting aspects. First, the precognitive experience may itself be a source of distress and anxiety, or it may have a positive, reassuring quality. Second, the response of psychiatric authorities may be experienced as open or critical. Psychiatry and psychotherapy are highly self-reflective disciplines, and so are the histories of those disciplines produced by practitioners such as Crabtree and Ellenberger. But the role of figures such as Priestley, whose status beyond the medical and therapeutic establishment elicits a different mode of commentary from patients, is of value towards a further refraction of psychiatric work than may be possible using patient testimonies collected by practitioners.

A virtuous hearing of precognition testimonies needs to accommodate both the phenomenology of precognition and the phenomenology of psychiatric encounters. Investigations that do not take psychiatric experience into account risk complicity in structural identity power relating to mental health. It is also desirable for the hearer’s own subject position in relation to both precognition and psychiatry to be made explicit or at the very least accounted for in any collection or relaying of such testimonies. Given that psychiatric histories may or may not be declared by witnesses to precognition, an ideal context for hearing is one in which the maximum has been done to show that psychiatric history does not automatically discount any claim to precognition, and that any tension or conflict with psychiatric authorities is a relevant component of the precognition narrative. Experience of precognition must be allowed to have positive, negative and neutral relationships to mental health, and be afforded a flexible causal relationship to well-being, rather than being fixed as negative or as symptom. One way to accommodate these needs is to afford each speaker the status assigned by Fagan to Socrates: “He is the narrator of his own history, the expounder of his stance toward his present situation, the prophet of his own future.” To this end, a combination of ethnography with literary analysis should be developed in the history of parapsychology.

Histories of parapsychology that focus mainly on cases deemed valuable by the investigating actors themselves will effectively repeat the regulation of subjectivity that has been practiced by those investigators. Efforts to identify and work with collections such as the letters to Priestley, deemed of low value by investigators, will be rewarded with new perspectives on the intersecting social histories not only of psychiatry and parapsychology, but of other domains invoked by witnesses, such as religion and the media. Such resources will likely be found beyond the archives of psychical research organisations. It is possible that the records of British Premonitions Bureau, established by psychiatrist John Barker and journalist Peter Fairley following the 1966 Aberfan colliery disaster, will come to light (MacKenzie, 1974: pp. 137–145). Mass Observation archives will also be useful (Hazelgrove, 2000: p. 227). Further resources, including dream diaries kept according to Dunne’s instructions, will be scattered, and in many cases beyond recovery. But when they do emerge, their historical value must be recognised.

As a first step towards a future ethnography of prophetic dreams in Western modernity, I conclude with a further reflection on how my personal circumstances have shaped the project so far. Unlike Priestley, Jung or Socrates, I have never experienced precognition

<sup>15</sup> For example Ehrenwald (1951), Greenbank (1966).



first hand, and am therefore approaching these testimonies from an external perspective. My own mental health problems are mild compared with those who have experienced hospitalisation, but I have had direct non-medical contact with a range of psychiatric conditions through an earlier period of involvement with homeless people. Twenty years of higher education, first as a student and now as a lecturer, have distanced me from that world and my circle has narrowed. The letters to Priestley have captured my attention in part because I have research interests in popular experience and the relations between literature and science. But it has become clear that they also offer a way for me to re-engage with stories from marginalised individuals, with less of the confusion and frustration that face-to-face encounters often entail. Writing a social history or literary ethnography of precognition in Britain is one way to compensate for the trade-off I have made, gaining security but losing an element of social and psychic adventure. But this blurring of the research project with a need to change the texture of my life may not be the best way to achieve either goal. Perhaps the project will be better served through a separate community activities that take some pressure off, and allow further reflection on, the dreams project. Meanwhile, I hope that others will begin work on these and other collections of spontaneous cases of psychical phenomena to explore the social history of this subject.

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